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Transcript

A Conversation with Prince Turki al-Faisal [Rush Transcript; Federal News Service, Inc.]

Speaker: Turki Al-Faisal, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States

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KAREN ELLIOTT HOUSE: Good evening. Welcome to today's Council on Foreign Relations meeting.

I will start with a couple of housekeeping rules here, the first being please turn off your cell phone and your BlackBerry. I'll do that myself when I go back over there. (Laughter.) And the second is to remind everyone that this meeting is on the record, which means that the participants here are welcome to use the information you receive here but not to refer to the speaker or anyone else in the audience and not to say where you heard what you heard—so not to refer to the council either.

The order of the day here is—I'm going to do a—(cross talk). It's on the record; that's what I said. (Cross talk.) Oh, you can quote. Okay, fine. I thought there was a unique definition of on the record here, but all right. So you can refer to His Royal Highness Prince Turki. I wondered why there was so much conversation in the room.

Our speaker today is His Royal Highness Prince Turki, who's the ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United States since July, but his association with this country, as you know from looking at his biography, is much longer and much deeper than July of 2005.

He graduated from The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey nearly 40 years ago, if I can say that—(laughter)—and went on to pursue undergraduate education at Georgetown University. And when I had the privilege of meeting him, he was the director general of the General Intelligence Directorate in Saudi Arabia—which is the foreign intelligence operation in his country—a job he held for nearly a quarter of a century before becoming ambassador to Great Britain and Ireland and now here.

He knows his country intimately and he knows our country very well so he's going to frame this discussion by giving five to 10 minutes of remarks, and then I have the privilege of asking him questions and then you all have the opportunity to ask him questions.

So, Your Highness?

AMBASSADOR TURKI AL-FAISAL: Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. As you can see, I had a whole file prepared to talk to you about prepared by my staff, but I have decided to forgo that because I think the kind of discussion we should have is a direct one-on-one discussion, and I hope I can live up to your expectations.

Following in the footsteps of a foreign minister is always an arduous and difficult job to do, but I hope I can at least partake of his past contributions to the Council on Foreign Relations. And if I find any difficulties, I have enough staff with me to put the blame on some of them. (Laughter.)

Mr. Haass, thank you very much for the invitation.

Ms. Karen House, you mentioned 40 years ago as the time that I left Lawrenceville. It was actually 42 years ago.

But anyway, for a moment there when you were talking about the rules of the game here, I thought we were in the middle of the National Security Agency regulations. (Laughter.) So please go ahead and quote me as much as you like.

The kingdom and the United States have had a long history of cooperation. We've gone through ups and downs. We've gone through difficult periods and easy periods—honeymoons and divorces and all sorts of compilations of relationships that have survived the test of time, and I think will continue to do so.

As ambassador to your great country, not only am I privileged, but also I think I am truly the beneficiary of a very great opportunity, not just to participate—

I see Mr. Pelletreau there. How are you, Mr. Pelletreau?

—not just to participate in developing the relationship between the two countries but also to continue my education here. Lawrenceville and Georgetown did what they did for me and you have the result in front of you.

In two, three, four or five years' time when I leave here, I hope to be a better man than when I came here. And I think the American people are a people that are to be admired and respected for their accomplishments, not just in humanitarian affairs but also for literally maintaining the peace for the last 50 years or so since the Second World War.

Now, many of you will have things to say contrary to that, but I think overall, as far as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is concerned, in our relationship with the U.S., we've had a mutually beneficial relationship whereby both of us benefited from the other. And I can safely say, and I think proudly say, that it is a relationship not just one of oil for security but, more broadly speaking, a relationship of a people to people.

Literally, hundreds of thousands of Saudis have passed through the gates of the United States, either seeking education, as I did, or health care, as thousands of Saudis have done, or simply to practice business, which is one of the major contributions that your country has made to the international community. It is the kind of business activity that is promoted and literally supported by your actions and your activities and encouraged as a means of widening the cake, if you like, or widening the circle of the cake that can be shared by people everywhere. And we definitely in Saudi Arabia have shared in that cake.

And if you see Saudi Arabia today, it is in fervor. It is a country that is moving forward at great speed, both economically and socially and even politically, despite what you may read in The New York Times or The Wall Street Journal.

But otherwise, I think what makes this a very important relationship for both our peoples is that as I was saying good-bye to the king and I asked him, "Your Majesty, how should I deal with President Bush and the American people?" And he turned to me without batting an eye and he said just be frank with them. And I think that's the kind of relationship that we aspire to and pursue with you.

I related to Mr. Haass what I said to your secretary of State when I gave her a copy of my credentials back in

September. I reminded her of a story of Winston Churchill being a guest at the White House during the war years when President Roosevelt wanted to honor him by putting him up in the White House instead of Blair House. And one night, Mr. Roosevelt wheeled into Mr. Churchill's room and found him stark naked. And so he tried to wheel back embarrassedly and so on, and Churchill turned to him and he said, "Mr. President, the prime minister of England has nothing to hide from the president of the United States." (Laughter.) And I assured the secretary of State that I was not going to come to her naked—(laughter)—on any occasion, but that that is the kind of relationship we would like to have with the United States.

And so with those remarks, I will be happy to take any questions from you. Thank you.

(Applause.)

HOUSE: At this point in the U.S.-Saudi relationship, you did your—I'm using Winston Churchill's story there about nothing to hide from Condoleezza Rice and wanting to cooperate. Is Iran a threat, its nuclear capability a threat, to the kingdom?

AL-FAISAL: Ms. House, frankly I wish you hadn't asked me that question because this is the only topic that I am not going to talk about tonight. And that is because we are in the process of discussing things with Iran, and the instructions that I have received from my superiors is that as these discussions are continuing that I would decline talking about it in detail. But I would refer you to what our foreign minister has said in the past about our relationship with Iran and so on. And also I had some things to say about it in the past.

So I am sorry if I disappoint people, but I am just as disappointed as you are.

HOUSE: Well, can I try once more on that? I think it's your foreign minister who said that the time isn't right for sanctions against Iran. What has to happen? When will the time be right? Or what has to happen to make it either unnecessary or the time be right?

AL-FAISAL: The late King Faisal used to be known in our part of the world as the great sphinx because he said very little on any subject. And in this case, I'm going to be the little sphinx. (Laughter.)

HOUSE: I might say it's a trait he passed on admirably to both of his sons, so I know you and Prince Saud are worthy little sphinxes. (Laughter.)

AL-FAISAL: Thank you.

HOUSE: Well, can we switch to another topic then? (Laughter.)

AL-FAISAL: Yes, madam, with pleasure.

HOUSE: With pleasure. (Laughter.).

Obviously, in your neighborhood we're deeply involved in Iraq, and I assume that it is definitely in Saudi Arabia's interest to have stability in Iraq. If that's the case, will or why doesn't Saudi Arabia do more to support the creation of a government in Iraq?

AL-FAISAL: We are doing quite a bit. As you know, since the toppling of Saddam's regime, immediately the kingdom initiated an aid package to the Iraqi people that included not just humanitarian aid and services and so on but also a field hospital that operated for nearly a year in Baghdad treating Iraqis. Unfortunately, when the security situation worsened in Iraq, we had to pull out our representation at that time.

We have also committed ourselves to the Madrid aid effort to Iraq by committing ourselves to providing \$1 billion of aid

to Iraq. And just from November to the present, we have been contacting and engaging with all parties in Iraq to urge them to come together and form a kind of national reconciliation effort. In Jeddah, we held a conference for the Arab League last December, I think it was, at which time the decision to go to Cairo and invite Iraqi political and other leaders to come to Cairo took place. And that meeting occurred and the Iraqis who were involved represented all walks of life in present day Iraq. And they got over their differences, whether Sunni, Shi'a, Kurdish, Turkomen; you name it, they have it in Iraq.

And they, if you like, issued a manifesto from that meeting which foresaw the convening of another and wider conference in Baghdad, either at the end of this month or at the beginning of next month.

And when your secretary of State visited with King Abdullah in November last year, she asked him to urge the Sunnis to participate and to be proactive in the political developments in Iraq. And he told her: "Madame Secretary, I'm not going to do that. What I am going to do is to urge all Iraqis to be proactive in that political process because we don't want to be identified with simply one sect or one ethnic division in Iraq." And that has been the case. There have been contacts in Saudi Arabia and outside Saudi Arabia with all of the factions in Iraq to urge them to reach a national reconciliation, that hopefully the elections that took place in January—because of the participation of the Sunnis in greater numbers than ever before and now in the negotiations for the formation of the government, they are playing a very important role there, and along with the Shi'as and the Kurds and those who do not identify themselves with any particular sect.

So that effort is not only being supported by Saudi Arabia but was actually initiated by the kingdom through the Jeddah meeting in December of last year.

HOUSE: So if and when there is a government in Iraq, Saudi Arabia is prepared to deal with that government?

AL-FAISAL: Absolutely. We have dealt in the past with all of the interim governments that came to Iraq and we've urged all of the factions involved to think more in terms of being Iraqi than being either Shi'a or Sunni or Kurd or Turkomen or Yezidi or any of the subdivisions of Iraq.

One other thing I think that has not been much reported on in the American press and even in the Western press is that during the last parliamentary elections in Iraq, particularly in the Sunni areas in Iraq, the Iraqi resistance played a very leading role in protecting the polling booths in those areas from attacks by the so-called Jihadi foreign elements, like Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi and those who operate within his sphere. And they did that as a signal, I think, to all of us and, more particularly, to the rest of the Iraqi people that they were willing to be constructive in allowing the Iraqi people to have full representation in the parliament.

HOUSE: Do you think the U.S. has enough troops in Iraq?

AL-FAISAL: I really don't know. I'm not an American military expert nor any kind of military expert.

I can tell you that after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the lawlessness and the, you know, simple grabbing at everything, people—mob rule, as it were, took over in Iraq and there were not enough troops to police the areas at that time. But we understand from our American colleagues now is that the training of Iraqi security forces, both police and the army, is running apace and is increasing in intensity, and as they acquire more know-how and more capability, they take over the policing and guarding of all of Iraqi territories and institutions.

And so, not being on the ground, as it were, one has to judge by what one sees in reporting by the press. Some of it is rather positive; some of it is rather negative. And the press gets away with that, but if you are a politician trying to do that, you'd be called to be flip-flopping.

But unfortunately, being so far away from it, really, all I can say is that report to you what we hear from others.

HOUSE: What do you know as opposed to what do you read in the press about what the Iranians are doing in Iraq?

AL-FAISAL: Again, I would have to refer you to what our foreign minister said in this council not too long ago.

HOUSE: Which was?

AL-FAISAL: Mr. Haass, will you remind me? (Laughter.) I think it's all in all the publications.

HOUSE: Then repeat the foreign on those.

Can I switch to—this administration has obviously had a goal of expanding democracy in the Middle East to, as they've put it, drain the swamp, if you will, of Arab despots and open up a new chapter. Iraq is obviously a part of that, now the elections in Palestine. In your mind, have we made progress on that goal? Or have we regressed over the last four years?

AL-FAISAL: I can tell you, as far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, the issue of economic, social and political reform is both a horizontal and a vertical issue because it comes up from the bottom, from the average citizen, and it also comes down from the top from King Abdullah and his government.

In the year 2003, before his death, the late King Fahd spoke to the consultative assembly about his vision for a reform program for Saudi Arabia. And he summarized it in six points.

The first point is to stress and re-stress the direction of the religious ethos, if you like, of Saudi Arabia as that being identified by the Prophet Mohammed—peace be upon him—who when he was asked, “tell us who you are, Muslims,” he said we are a people of the middle—in other words, not zealous but not lax for Islam. And the king at that time urged the mosque preachers and the higher religious authorities in the kingdom, and even in the schools and the universities where religion is taught, to emphasize this practice of the Prophet Mohammed.

The second point that he stressed was the rivaling of the political participation in the decision-making process in the kingdom.

The third point that he stressed was that women have an equal role to play in the development of Saudi Arabia as men.

The fourth point that he stressed was revamping of our educational system so that individual Saudis can be taught the skills and the know-how to be able to participate in the marketplace in the modern world.

The fifth point that he stressed, of course, was economic reform to allow for the creation of jobs and industry and so on to absorb the increasingly growing number of young people that are coming on the job market in Saudi Arabia.

And the sixth point that he made was that the government machinery, the bureaucracy, should be streamlined so that it can perform on all of those issues, and so on.

And if you look at the record from 2003 until today, you will find the following: We've had a national dialogue center established in the kingdom where every year a topic is chosen to be discussed by the people of Saudi Arabia. And subcommittees meet in the various provinces in Saudi Arabia in public and on television to discuss various issues like the role of women in life, the role of—the issue of terrorism, and the issue of dealing with the other—meaning the non-Muslims—the issue of youth, et cetera. And these have been going on for the last four years and expanding as time goes on.

The other thing that has happened, of course, is that we've had municipal elections where 50 percent of the municipal councils have been elected by Saudi citizens. And these councils are now operating. And hopefully in the next round of elections in three years' time universal suffrage will also be applied to this to include women, as they were not included in the last elections.

As far as women are concerned, all of the education and job opportunities in the kingdom have been opened to all women at any time that they want. And as a matter of fact, today in Saudi Arabia, we have more women graduates from the universities than we have men graduates. And on a uniform basis, they far outclass their male colleagues in that field.

So these are just a few of the things that have happened over the last three years. And as I mentioned in my introduction, the economic boom that is taking place in the kingdom today is not solely due to the increase in oil income in the kingdom. But rather, I think more than that it is an affirmation of the people's confidence in the system in Saudi Arabia. People are putting their life savings and their money—and those who have money abroad—for example, like in the United States or in Europe and so on—have brought back some of that money to invest in a very booming market that gives you, I think over the last month or so, more than 25 percent for your investment. I don't think you can beat that anywhere nowadays. But it is that kind of development and progress that we've had in the kingdom.

HOUSE: There are a lot of other topics to discuss—oil, et cetera—but I know there are other people out here who are real experts on oil and Israel, et cetera. So I'm going to turn to the audience.

Yes, sir?

Could you please for the question period wait for the microphone and identify yourself and ask one question, please?

QUESTIONER: His Highness, you (know ?) much better than we are—

HOUSE: Would you identify yourself? Excuse me, could you identify yourself?

QUESTIONER: Gregor Uzinski (ph) at (Polish News ?).

His Highness, you know much better Arab nations and you (think ?)—(inaudible)—we are. And (will ?) you think that Bremer as the worst move of the—in first year was dissolving Iraqi Army and sending teachers home. This automatically make base—they may be underground parties and movement against U.S. troops. Or you think this was really not only this man because it happened later because Arab nation has some type of resistance for just proud honor against foreign forces?

AL-FAISAL: Well, I think, if I may, I would refer you to what Mr. Bremer himself said about that issue, and he was very frank in that. And he thought that, as he expressed in his book, that the disbanding of the army and the security forces and the Ba'ath party was the wrong thing to do. And I think—I don't know if he put it in these words or not, but—I don't remember now—but if he had to do it over again, he would have been more careful about how that issue was handled by the officials who handled it when they did.

People will resist a foreign occupation any time they see it in their country. And I think the political process that is now in process—and as I mentioned earlier, the fact that all of the political factions in Iraq are now participating and the fact that the resistance cooperated and protected the polling booths in Iraq shows that the people of Iraq want to move forward. They want to benefit from the present rather than look upon the past. And this is where the kingdom, and I think other countries, are moving as well with them.

HOUSE: Mort?

QUESTIONER: Your Highness, I think—

HOUSE: Mort, could you introduce yourself?

QUESTIONER: I'm Mort Zuckerman with U.S. News and World Report.

AL-FAISAL: You're well known, Mr. Zuckerman.

QUESTIONER: I'm very happy to see you again.

Many in the West really, I think, are stunned by the outbreak of the kind of almost culture of death that has come out of the world of Islam, manifested, of course, in the form of suicide bombing. I wonder if you could give us some insight as to why that fever is almost raging across the Islamic world and whether or not in your comments you might also discuss whether or not the export of the Wahibi religion from Saudi Arabia contributed to that in any way?

AL-FAISAL: Thank you, Mr. Zuckerman. And I follow your writings in your magazine, of course, and that's been a constant refrain in your writings.

You call it the culture of death and put it in the context of—almost as if behind every Muslim mosque there is someone ready with a suicide belt to explode himself against the West or against other interests. I would disagree with that impression. Inasmuch as the West was surprised, if you like, by this culture of death, I can assure you that the majority of Muslims were even more surprised because this culture of death runs counter to everything that Muslims hold dear to themselves.

There is a verse in the Koran which says that killing one soul is like killing all of mankind. And other verses in the Koran refer to the innate value of life and the importance of safeguarding and guaranteeing that life, even in time of war.

The Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, when he was in conflict with first the Romans, and then after his death the Muslims followed in their conflict with the Persians, strict instructions were given to the army commanders not to kill innocent people, not to attack places of worship, not to cut trees and, generally, to be as embracing as they could be of the non-combatants that they meet along the way.

What I can tell you is this culture of death, unfortunately, is being promoted and practiced by a cult. And religious cults have arisen in all religions throughout history. This is, I think, the most recent manifestation of that in which the cult leader has a cult philosophy to which cult recruits devote themselves and sacrifice their lives without question about the viability or the legality or the justifiability of their action. And unfortunately, bin Laden has managed to propagate this cult and make it into the death cult that it has become.

As to whether Wahabism and so-called export of Wahabism from Saudi Arabia has contributed to this culture of death and suicide bombing, I am a direct descendant of Sheikh Hamid Nadrohab (sp), who preached in the 18th century in Saudi Arabia a reform movement which fought against superstition and idolatry and so on and malpractices that had come about and accrued around the practice of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. And certain principles about his teachings also follow from the teachings of previous Muslims, scholars and thinkers—the four great Sunni teachers of Islam—(names inaudible). He followed the—(inaudible)—school from those four teachers.

And on principles like, for example, suicide: All Muslims stand against suicide, for whatever reason it may come about. And the religious authorities in the kingdom under the leadership of mufti of Saudi Arabia, have issued fatwas against suicide bombings, even before September 11th, when these activities were undertaken in Palestine and Israel. Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh issued a fatwa saying that suicide bombings are against the religion and should not be followed at all.

On issues of—

HOUSE: Why do you think there's been such an explosion in that—in suicide bombings? I mean, you know, you're saying it's not Islamic, but there has been this sharp increase in that.

AL-FAISAL: I can tell you that this is part and parcel of the kind of cult philosophy that found residence in the political situation in our part of the world. Nothing justifies any terrorist act, whether through suicide bombing or through any other activity, but when you have people faced with desperation and a general absence of any justice or wherewithal—

whether it is in terms of normal standards of living, education and so on—as you have seen happen in the occupied territories of Palestine, the people have turned to desperate measures.

But even in Palestine, if I may say, the al Qaeda cult as a cult has not found root. The suicide bombings in Palestine have taken a different tack from the al Qaeda tack, if you like. Hamas and the Jihad and others identify themselves differently from al Qaeda and they have suicide bombings, which they justify as being legitimate means of war under occupation. That is their justification for it. And that is—when they started doing that, our mufti in Saudi Arabia declared publicly that that route is against the teachings of Islam.

So Wahabi, I think, has taken on, if you like—has become a kind of punching bag identified by governments and groups for the sake of an easier and simpler way of explaining things than it necessarily should be that way.

As I told you, on basic principles of theology, the Wahabi teachings contradict 180 degrees the cult of bin Laden and the suicide bombings that take place, wherever they may be.

HOUSE: The gentleman in the back to your left. Okay?

QUESTIONER: Thank you.

AL-FAISAL: He told me he was going to pose troubling questions, and I told him I may give him troubling answers. (Laughter.)

QUESTIONER: Your Highness, Val Doss (sp) from InsCap Management

AL-FAISAL: From?

Q InsCap Management.

The question—I wanted to actually press you a little bit on an issue you touched on, democracy. Democracy based on universal adult franchise—that is one person, one vote—on a notion of dignity of the individual—when you look at that as a concept, do you in your mind think in the practice of Islam in the kingdom, the tenets of those practices, there is something very fundamentally incompatible with the simple fundamental notions of democracy as it has taken root across the globe?

Thank you.

AL-FAISAL: I am glad you asked that question, because I want you all to know that even before President Bush's call for democracy and the elections in our part of the world—and when the Saudi kingdom was established, Islamic principles dictated upon us the practice of a bai'a. Some of you probably know that word more than I do, but basically what it is a contract that the citizen enters into with the person that he chooses to be his leader for reciprocity in how they deal with each other. The citizen vows allegiance and—(inaudible)—obeying and hearing from the leader in return for the leader's responsibility to the citizen to protect and guarantee the rights of the citizen within the framework of Islamic Shari'a. And that bai'a is entered into in a vote, a public vote, if you like.

When King Abdullah became king, he received in public in the official residence—not the official working place of the king in Saudi Arabia—the citizens' bai'a through handshake, that every citizen comes and shakes his hand and says the following words to him: I give you the bai'a in pursuit of the dictates of the Koran and Sunnah of the prophet—the Sunnah meaning the way of the prophet. And this bai'a is not exclusive to men. Even women are enjoined to do that bai'a. And the king received women in his home later on to receive their bai'a. And in the various provinces of Saudi Arabia, the governors in those provinces receive the bai'a in the name of the king for the citizens who cannot go to the capital and give the king directly their bai'a.

And I remember I was then ambassador in London—in the embassy in London, and I was told in the embassy here in Washington, a bai'a book was opened for Saudi citizens to come and sign their names so that they can express their—not just allegiance but their contractual arrangement with the new king. So as a process of elections, that has been the practice since the time of the successors of the prophet, 1,400 years ago.

I think where we as Muslims—not just in the kingdom but in other Muslim countries—have been lacking and have failed to do is in institutionalizing it and making it a process that is formal and institutionalized so that people know exactly what is expected of them, when they can expect it and so on.

So the issue of one man, one vote is not alien to the society in Saudi Arabia, nor do I imagine in any Muslim society, because it is part and parcel of the Muslim's makeup that he should practice the bai'a. If not, he would be committing a sin. And I mean that he and she.

HOUSE: I think the differences in our society—we get to decide who we profess our loyalty to, if you will, by going to the ballot box and choosing between one, two, three, four, as opposed to simply an expression of loyalty.

AL-FAISAL: But may I just continue on that point, because you make a very interesting point, Ms. House.

Three years ago in Davos, this issue came up, and I asked the panel moderator whether he thought the election of President Bush in the year 2000 was a legitimate election because the majority one man, one vote went to the other candidate, yet the Electoral College was the one that decided this issue in your society. And the answer that came back to me, which made sense after I thought about it a while, was that that is true, but the Electoral College was part and parcel of the government system that came about as a result of the consent of the people. And hence, that made it legitimate as a means of electing the president, in addition to the issue of one man, one vote.

And we in the kingdom, in our progress for the future, we will find our ways of broadening the concept of the consent of the people to be inclusive of all of the citizens of Saudi Arabia.

HOUSE: Many, many questions. And the gentleman in the—yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Barnett Rubin, New York University. First, I just urge you as Saudi Arabia democratizes not to emulate the 2000 presidential election of the United States. (Laughter.)

No one knows better than you the situation and the cast of characters along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. I wonder —

AL-FAISAL: I think you know better. (Laughter.)

QUESTIONER: Well, we know in different ways. We missed each other in Kandahar in June, 1998 by a few days.

I wonder if you could give us your evaluation of why the insurgency and cross-border terrorism have intensified rather than abating and what actions various actors should take in particular to lower the temperature between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

AL-FAISAL: On the second part of the question, I think, of course, it is up to the leadership between Pakistan and Afghanistan to do that. I know that President Karzai and President Musharraf are men of common sense. And we see that in everything that they do within their countries and within their—(word inaudible). So it would be surprising that they don't—that the two countries don't have an even closer relationship than they already do. But you'll have to explain it perhaps more than me. I mean, you're more recently there than I am.

On the issue of dealing with the insurgency and its (fights?), again, as we were talking earlier whether there enough troops in Iraq or not—I mean, the issue in Afghanistan has to be decided on a broad military outlook—whether there are

enough troops there to carry the fight to the so-called insurgents or whether the government itself, the central government, can acquire the security and defense apparatus that will allow it to meet these challenges.

HOUSE: Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: Doron Weber, Sloan Foundation.

You were in charge of the General Intelligence Directorate for 25 years beginning in 1977. How early did you become aware of Osama bin Laden and what was your strategy in dealing with him?

AL-FAISAL: I met Osama bin Laden five times in my life as intelligence director. Mid-'80s to end of 1989 or beginning of 1990 was the last time I saw him. And when the withdrawal of Soviet troops in Afghanistan occurred, bin Laden and his supporters within Afghanistan—and by the way, that's where al Qaeda was born. As I like to—prefer to say, the al Qaeda was born in the hills of Afghanistan rather than in the deserts of Saudi Arabia. And they decided that they were going to form a group that will, in their view, protect Muslim interests throughout the world as they identified themselves as being the primary claimants to the credit of driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan.

And so, by 1990 when I last saw him at the beginning of that year, he had come to me with a proposition that he wants to bring his Mujaheddin as he called them, to liberate the then-Marxist regime in south Yemen. And I advised him that that was not the right time to do it because there were other factors playing there politically and economically. South Yemen was being—not a favorite word of mine—weaned away from the Soviet Union at that time. So, he left and that was the last that I saw of him.

He then remained in the kingdom for another two years after that, sometimes going to mosques and preaching without taking permission to do so and being arrested for doing that and reprimanded and then let go.

And I think at the end of 1992—perhaps Mr. Rubin can correct me on that—he asked for permission to leave Saudi Arabia. And he left and went to Afghanistan. And he went from there in—end of 1993 he went to the Sudan, and that's when he began operating against the kingdom from the Sudan. He was stripped of his Saudi citizenship in 1994. His financial assets were frozen at that time and even his personal family disowned him in public at that time.

By 1996, he moved from the Sudan to Afghanistan and it went on from there. So we were pretty much aware of bin Laden from the very beginning, if you like. Not perhaps so much in terms of how dangerous he could be, but as he grew and as his movement grew, people became more aware of his danger.

And the first terrorist act undertaken by bin Laden was against Saudi Arabia in 1995 when an explosives truck was exploded next to a training facility for the national guard where I believe 11 American trainers were killed along with other nationalities.

HOUSE: The lady in the back.

QUESTIONER: Good evening.

AL-FAISAL: Your turn will come. (Laughs.)

QUESTIONER: Good evening, Your Highness. My name is—(name and affiliation inaudible)—Beirut, Lebanon.

AL-FAISAL: (Inaudible.)

QUESTIONER: My question goes to Lebanon, of course. Tomorrow is the first anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. What are your thoughts on the outcome of the assassination and other assassination?

AL-FAISAL: Well, this is a very sad occasion for all of us. Those of us who had the privilege and honor to know Rafik Hariri know how much he meant not just to us as individuals but to a host of Lebanese and non-Lebanese individuals who received his generosity and his acts of kindness, whether in providing scholastic scholarships or simply meeting the medical needs of individuals and families, and sometimes even providing homes for people who didn't have homes. So we all mourn his death. And I think the greatest pity of all of this is that a man like Rafik Hariri is not going to be replaced by anybody. He was unique. And his loss is, therefore, that much more magnified than if you could have somebody who could be cloned, let's say, and brought to power.

What we are seeking, of course, with the world community is finality to his death—who killed him and how that happened and meeting justice by bringing those people who killed him to court—he and the other people who were assassinated in Lebanon. And that's why we have been in full support of the United Nations' efforts in that endeavor, and we hope that they will reach finality sooner rather than later.

HOUSE: Gentleman here—sorry.

QUESTIONER: Allen Hyman, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. Hamas has been supported, at least for their social services, by the kingdom for many years. Now that Hamas has achieved political power and continues to call for the destruction of Israel, a member of the United Nations, how will the kingdom use its influence to try to change Hamas' policy?

AL-FAISAL: One thing that everybody has to keep in mind is that the kingdom never supported any specific party in Palestine. Our support has always gone to the Palestinian people through United Nations institutions, through the World Bank, through the Arab League and through all of the international institutions that operate and have operated in Palestinian refugee camps and in territories occupied by Israel.

Our king visited Pakistan just recently and his visit coincided with the coming of the results of the elections in Palestine where Hamas appeared and came out as the winner in those elections.

In the joint communique that came out between King Abdullah and President Pervez Musharraf, both of them enjoined Hamas to do the following: first of all, that they must commit to the commitments of the Palestinian Authority, because the Palestinian Authority, it's *raison d'être*, it's legitimacy derives from the Oslo Agreements with Israel.

Secondly, they enjoined Hamas to commit to the Arab peace plan, the Abdullah peace plan, which was the first plan that talked about a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel on an equitable basis. And thirdly, they enjoined Hamas to commit to the roadmap for peace, which was recognized by the world community as the means to achieve the two-state solution.

And at the same time, both of them enjoined the world community to recognize that the Palestinian people, through democratic elections, have chosen their representatives. And therefore, that process must take its place. And I think we are still—it would be premature now to judge what is going to happen because there is still no Hamas government in place. We are still—the Palestinians are still under an interim government until a new government takes over.

My view is that Hamas will not give us anything, if you like, whether in commitments or otherwise, until they find out who is going to be their interlocutor after the Israeli elections, which will be coming at the end of next month. Then we can expect some movement on that issue, but the kingdom has already expressed its views on that to Hamas and to the world community.

HOUSE: Two more questions.

AL-FAISAL: If I didn't let her ask me a question, she would really give it to me in—(inaudible)—newspaper. (Laughter.)

QUESTIONER: Thank you, Your Highness. (Name and affiliation inaudible.)

Back to Iran—and I respect the fact that you don't want to tell us the details of what's going on, but you said we are in the process of discussing things with Iran. Are you discussing them bilaterally? Is it in the context of the regional other concerns, from Hamas to Hezbollah to Syria to Iraq? Is it in connection only with the nuclear capability? Therefore, might there be a dimension with what Russia and China are trying to do? And is it true that you're acting in your good roles, your good offices throughout the region on the basis of some people say—and bad stability is better than good chaos? (Laughter.)

AL-FAISAL: Well, I respect your respect. (Laughter.) Thank you. (Laughter.)

HOUSE: I'm sorry to see that you had no better luck than I did.

Okay, this will probably have to be the last question. The gentleman here. Unless the answers are brief, and then we'll get this gentleman.

QUESTIONER: John Lamb, Sidley Austin.

Your Highness, I had the good fortune of spending a couple of years in your country in Riyadh in the early '80s. As somebody who is a practicing Catholic, I was able to find opportunity to go to mass at the American military compound in Riyadh, unlike a lot of the Filipino workers there.

And I was wondering if you see any time in the future where the hundreds of thousands of people of other faiths who are guest workers in your country will have an opportunity to worship discretely as they can in other places in the—(inaudible)—like Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, the Emirates. And Qatar also follows the principles of Mohammed in the (Wahab ?).

AL-FAISAL: Well, of course. I think this is an issue that has to be not just pursued by the kingdom but also explained in as much as possible so that people don't misunderstand where we come from.

As you know, the kingdom is the place of the two holy mosques, and as such, the issue of worship by others is ingrained in the teachings of the Koran and the practice of the prophet. So there is nothing in Saudi law or Saudi practice to infringe upon people worshipping, as you said, in their homes and in their privacy on that—not just Christians, but Jews and any other followers of religion.

We have in the kingdom millions of Muslims—have always posed to the question to ourselves—we believe in all of the prophets, Mohammed being the last one. We revere from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David, Solomon, you name it, Jesus, Jonah, Jacob. All the prophets of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we consider them to be our prophet. And we also accept that the divine revelations to these prophets, the Torah and the—(inaudible)—are our books, along with the Koran. And our question to Christians and Jews is that why don't you reciprocate and believe in our prophet as we believe in your prophets? Why don't you accept our Koran as your book as we accept your Bible in its entirety, whether Old Testament or New Testament?

And so, the balance here is whether the individual practices of certain people in the kingdom who go and break into homes and confiscate Bibles and prevent people from worship almost in a manner that is—not almost: It is in a manner contrary to the practice of the prophet himself. And that is something for our legal authorities to deal with with these people.

And I know many of you here will say yes, but some of these people are officials of Saudi Arabia. And I say yes. This is one of the banes that we have to carry with us that in our dealing with our guests who live in the kingdom, there are among us in our society those who take, if you like, these unacceptable actions against a practice that the prophet himself allowed in his own mosque. And when he was visited by a group of Christians from the south of Arabia in that time, he allowed them to pray in his own mosque. So that is the balance that we have to deal with. And as I told you, as we

progress and go forward, King Abdullah has expressed his view publicly on that matter.

In convening the extraordinary summit meeting of Muslim countries just last December, one of the main topics there was on this issue of how to deal with the others, the non-Muslims—not just in our societies but even for Muslims who live in societies that are not Islamic. Along with that was an issue that was discussed at that conference, which was the issue of Islamaphobia, as we've seen some ramifications of that in the recent controversy over the cartoons that depicted the prophet—peace be upon him—in unacceptable and really terrible ways.

So you're right, and we have that lacking in our kingdom and we have to address it. And addressing it in front of an audience like this in this manner, I think, allows me as ambassador of Saudi Arabia to your country to explain some of the difficulties that we have and some of the problems as a society that we have.

HOUSE: One of my duties, Mr. Ambassador, is to close on time.

So I apologize to you and others who didn't get to ask your question.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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